

Shouting into the Void by gnomesb4trolls

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Summary:

Sometimes, when El is alone, the monsters come back.

Shouting into the Void

The time between school and dinner could be either the best or worst part of Eleven's day.

Most days, she and Will walked the half-mile home from school together. Sometimes Joyce or Jonathan had already come home, but usually the house was empty. El didn't mind: Will understood that she was still learning how to talk to people, and that after a whole day of concentrating as hard as she could she was usually exhausted, out of words. Sometimes they watched TV for a little while, and sometimes they started their homework right away, sitting across from each other at the kitchen table. Either way, it was a relief to sit with Will and not have to say anything, or pretend to be different than she was. That was what made her so tired about school: pretending that she understood everything that the teachers and the other kids said; pretending that she'd been going to school every day since she was a little girl, rather than learning how to crush things with her mind and listening to people halfway across the world. Sometimes, in the middle of class, she'd look around at the other kids and it would feel like there was a pane of glass between her and them, between the person they saw when they looked at her and who she was inside. She'd tried to explain this to Will once, and even though she'd struggled for the right words he'd understood what she meant.

"Sometimes I wonder what they'd think, if I told them about the Upside Down," he said. "I don't even know if I could make them understand what it was like."

Will had AV Club one day a week after school, and then after winter break he joined the Art Club. That meant two days that El walked home alone, and did her best to fill the time until Jonathan or Joyce got home.

At first, Joyce had worried about El walking home by herself, and had wanted Jonathan to change his work schedule so that he could pick her up on those days. El didn't want that, though: most of the kids at the school lived in the neighborhood, and almost none of

them got picked up. It would set her apart even more than she already was, and she didn't want the extra attention. It had taken all three of them to convince Joyce that she could handle it, that nothing could possibly happen between school and their house.

"She needs to feel like a normal kid," she'd overheard Jonathan saying to Joyce, late one night when she'd gotten up to go to the bathroom and they'd been in the living room talking. "Besides, we've been here three months and nothing's happened. I don't think anyone knows where we are."

Standing in the dark hallway, El had heard Joyce sigh. "You're right," she said. "I just want her to be safe, you know? After everything..."

"I know," Jonathan had said. "I know."

El had slipped into the bathroom and closed the door as quietly as she could, ignoring the pit in her stomach. By "everything," Joyce had meant Hop. She hardly ever said his name, but there was a quality to her silence when she didn't say it that El recognized.

She didn't mind the solitary walk home, most of the time. It was still cold and sometimes wet, but after a whole day in the school building—which was fine, really, except every so often when the fluorescent lights flickered and she was in the lab again—the winter air felt good. El walked slowly, sometimes glancing at the lighted windows of the houses she passed, stealing glimpses of the lives inside. And then, when she reached her own house, the porch light casting its yellow glow on the frozen lawn, something would swell in her chest, a warmth that she didn't know how to name. Even when the house was empty, it was hers. She hadn't thought that she'd be able to love another home this much, with Hop gone, but Joyce and Jonathan and Will belonged to her now, and she belonged to them, and most of the time that was enough.

There were other kinds of days, though.

Days when the walls of the school seemed to press on her, days when she had to hide in a bathroom stall to get her breathing under

control, but even that wasn't enough, and all she wanted was to go outside, but that wasn't allowed except at lunch. Days when she and Will were in different classes and she couldn't find him at lunch, and the crowds of people in the halls were so overwhelming that she was afraid to try.

Days when she walked home alone and every shadow on the sidewalk looked like a demogorgon, or a man with white hair and a black suit, and as soon as she got home she locked the doors and huddled on the couch in front of the TV, turning the volume up to drown out the voices shouting at her from underneath the silence.

"El?"

She opened her eyes. She'd fallen asleep on the couch, and for a second all she could see was the nubby brown fabric. El looked up into Will's face, his forehead knitted in a concerned frown. He was crouched next to the couch, his hand close to her shoulder but not touching her. The TV was still on, but it was only a soft murmur in the background: Will must have turned the volume down.

"I fell asleep," she said. She knew it was a silly thing to say, but she still felt groggy, halfway in a dream.

Will sat down on the floor, folding his legs under him. "It sounded like you were having a nightmare."

For a few minutes El had forgotten what she'd been dreaming about, but now it came back to her like a gust of cold wind knifing through her clothes. "It was about—a bad thing that happened. At the lab."

Will nodded. "Do you want to talk about it?"

She shook her head. She was having a harder time than usual thinking of words right now, and she didn't have the words for this anyway. Will still had that frown on his face; he looked so much older now than the first time she'd seen him, in the Upside Down. An idea came to her, like a figure emerging from the blackness.

"I think—I think I can show you."

They'd already turned the TV dial to a channel that they didn't get,

for the static, and El was about to tie a bandana around her eyes when Will reached out and put a hand on her arm. “Are you sure?” He asked, his brown eyes serious in the warm lamplight. “I mean, I know you’ve just started to get your powers back. I don’t want you to get drained.”

El gave him the best smile she could summon. “I’ll be all right,” she said. “I—I think it’ll help. To practice.”

He nodded. She knew that he had heard the words she hadn’t said: *I need this. I need you to see what it was like.* “OK, then.”

She took a deep breath and tied the bandana, then reached out for Will’s hands in the dark. He took them, and for a few seconds she tried to memorize the feel of this place: the scratchy carpet under her bare feet, Will’s hands in hers, the faint swish of sleet falling against the windows. Then she reached out with her mind and pulled, tugging the thread that would unravel all of it and take them both into the past.

When Will opened his eyes, he was standing next to El, holding her hand, and everything was black except for a scene in the middle distance: a lab table, with a much-younger and smaller El sitting across from a cage containing a fluffy white cat, its mouth open in a hiss.

Something twisted in his stomach, and he squeezed El’s hand. He wasn’t sure if she felt it, though: her eyes were fixed on her own small face, her expression oddly blank.

When it was over and El opened her eyes back in the present, her face felt wet. She touched her cheek; she’d been crying without realizing it.

In the lab, she hadn’t really understood what crying was: she’d only known that it happened when she was scared and that she wasn’t supposed to do it. Crying had always made everything worse, but sometimes she hadn’t been able to stop.

Joyce had told her once, on the day of Hop's funeral, that it was ok to cry. That crying was something her body needed to do, to get the bad feelings out. Sometimes, though, the shame still rose in her throat like vomit.

"I'm sorry," she said to Will. She knew, she *knew*, that she hadn't done anything wrong, but she'd just been back in that place, and for a few minutes she'd felt like that little girl again, the one who'd learned how to survive by being quiet.

Will shook his head. "It's not your fault," he said. "Come on." He stood up, and offered his hand. She let him help her up, and they settled on the couch again.

"I'm sorry that that happened to you," he said. "It wasn't..." Will shook his head, as if he couldn't find the words, "...it wasn't right."

"I know," she said, but she was crying again, crying for the scared, angry little girl she'd been, and for the men she'd killed without even knowing what she was doing. She wiped her face on the sleeve of her sweater. It was an old one of Jonathan's: he'd leant it to her one night when they were all watching TV and he'd seen her shivering, and he hadn't asked for it back. It was much too big for her and it was starting to fray at the elbows, but the soft brown fabric smelled like Jonathan, and home.

Will reached across the couch, slow and careful like he always was, and squeezed her hand. "I can make some hot chocolate, if you want."

She smiled at him, and something inside of her felt lighter. Hot chocolate was Will's cure for everything.

The truth was, it usually worked.